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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4879
INFO RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC
RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHINGTON DC
RUEHC/DEPT OF INTERIOR WASHINGTON DC
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHINGTON DC
RUEHZU/ASIAN PACIFIC ECONOMIC COOPERATION
RUEHPT/AMCONSUL PERTH 1529

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MELBOURNE 000025

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

Department for CA/OCS/ACS/EAP, White House for NSC Bader

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAID](#) [SENV](#) [CASC](#) [AS](#)

SUBJECT: FIRES: OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FRONT; US FIREFIGHTERS EN
ROUTE

Ref: A) Melbourne 24, B) Melbourne 23, C) Melbourne 21, D) Melbourne
20, E) Melbourne 17, F) Canberra 134, G) Canberra 100

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) Consul General traveled to the Whittlesea staging ground northeast of Melbourne on February 13. According to firefighters, the weekend will be critical as favorable weather conditions will continue to assist crews facing ongoing fires, none of which appear to be immediately life-threatening, though some of which may threaten Melbourne's water supply. The death toll from the fires stands at 181, but is expected to rise as emergency crews continue to go through burned-out areas. Sixty U.S. wildfire experts are expected to arrive on February 15 to assist in fire suppression and land rehabilitation. Post has not received any reports of U.S. citizens injured or killed in the blazes. We will discontinue daily sitreps, but will provide spot reporting as events arise. Weekend forecasts for Victoria appear favorable, but both South and Western Australia are anticipating warm weather. End Summary.

Observations from the Front

¶2. (SBU) Consul General (CG) traveled with lead USG/Australia firefighting liaison, Bodie Shaw (Deputy Director of the NIFC -- National Interagency Fire Center, Bureau of Indian Affairs) on February 13 to the staging ground for firefighting and relief operations in Whittlesea, located 35 kilometers northeast of Melbourne. Emergency personnel there told CG that ongoing fires in Victoria are by no means under control, though none appear to be immediately life-threatening. Efforts over the next two to three days will be crucial before anticipated warmer, windier weather sets in next week. Fire crews have focused efforts on protecting Melbourne's water catchment areas, and note that some are still threatened by ongoing fires. Firefighters will conduct a controlled burn on one of the catchment areas which was already 75 percent burned in order to protect the town of Healesville (50 km east of Melbourne) as well as to prevent the fires from spreading to Melbourne's eastern suburbs. While the death toll for the fires stands at 181, people who are only now coming out of the burned areas report that more bodies remain. Sixty U.S. wildfire experts and 15 Canadian firefighters are scheduled to arrive separately over the weekend.

¶3. (SBU) According to emergency personnel, the initial rush of displaced persons to Whittlesea following Saturday's fires was handled effectively as most found lodging with friends and family.

Philanthropic citizens even offered displaced persons lodging in spare rooms and vacation homes. A tent city set up to accommodate displaced persons continues to operate in Yea (located 75 kilometers northeast of Melbourne), but only housed 30 people on the night of February 12. Many residents of the fire affected areas (now treated as crime scenes) were prevented from returning to their homes as police continued to search for evidence of arson, though many of these areas have recently reopened. Insurance companies have set up tents at the staging center northeast of Melbourne and locals say that claims are being processed smoothly.

American Citizens

14. (SBU) As of 4:30 PM local time, post had not received any reports of U.S. citizens injured or killed in the fires. We verified the well-being of one of two outstanding welfare and whereabouts (W&W) requests. Post received biographic information for the second W&W case from Senator Mark Pryor's (AR) office on February 13. The concerned U.S. citizen is resident in Sydney. ConGen Sydney is now following up on the two outstanding Congressional W&W cases mentioned in Ref. A.

Comment

15. (SBU) The fires are far from over. Fire crews have prioritized protecting Melbourne's water catchment areas as well as preventing the fires from spreading to the metropolis' eastern suburbs. Officials, however, are worried about the longer term impacts of the fire as one of Melbourne's water catchment areas is nearly burned out and two of the remaining three are threatened by the fires. Meteorologists anticipate favorable weather to continue through the weekend in Victoria which will continue to aid firefighting efforts.

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Post will monitor conditions in South Australia where the fire danger remains elevated.

THURSTON